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But several area dealers are trying carve their niche, including Best Chevrolet (www.gmproshop.com); Saturn of Quincy (www.environs.com/saturn-quincy); Saturn of Hanover (www.environs.com/saturn-hanover); Columbia Motors (www.columbiamotors.com); and South Shore Volvo (www.sscars.com/volvo).

Full Text (1040 words)*Copyright Patriot Ledger Oct 24, 1996*

Rick Smith hopes not only to operate his car dealership on Route 18 through Weymouth, but on the information highway through cyberspace.

So Smith -- known for his low-tech spoofing of the Lone Ranger as "Loan A-Ranger" -- is now testing the high-tech waters of the Internet.

"I think it is very important," said Smith, who owns Ricky Smith Pontiac. "As people have less and less free time they want to get as much information as they can from their home and not have to take time away from their family."

Smith is one of a handful of local auto dealers starting to explore the possibilities of selling cars and providing information online.

So far, services offered via the Internet range from basic information to detailed inventory lists to online negotiations.

The actual number of car sales generated by Web home pages is unknown, but observers say it is still small.

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"I think we are all pretty much experimenting to see what happens," said Jim Perri, general sales manager of Weber Dodge in Hingham, "although it will never replace the salesperson because it can't replace the personal contact."

Weber Dodge (www.channel1.com/weber/) started its home page in March and, like Smith, has received inquiries on car prices from across the country.

Perri said he receives about six or seven leads a day -- although not all lead to sales -- and the Web site has been contacted about 25,000 times since its inception.

And it has produced some tangible results.

"It is really to try and generate extra business," he said. "I have sold some extra cars from it, probably one or two a month. It is usually people who come in and say, 'I saw you on the Web' or people who ask for a quote (online), then come in and buy the car."

Ricky Smith's site (www.rickysmith.com) is one of the larger and more detailed Web sites run by individual dealers, boasting 110 pages with a wide range of services and choices.

After dialing by computer into Smith's site, a user can do many things, including make a service appointment, read auto news stories, learn the names of salespeople, check the factory list price for a new car, request the price D1

of a customized car, participate in contests or check the used car inventory.

"Most people hope to get people to call them for information, but when I looked into it, that was not the way to go about it," Smith said. "People go to the site for information and they want specifics."

The Web site, started about five months ago, continues to evolve as both Smith and others discover what works and what doesn't. Smith's daily hits are up to about 250, from 100 last month.

"It takes time," Smith said. "When I first went online I thought it would be like a 'Field of Dreams' scenario -- build it and they will come -- but it doesn't work that way. It has taken some trial and error, but right now I feel we have an extremely successful Web site, in that it has all the elements it is supposed to have."

The site was created and is maintained by Spectrum Technologies of Weymouth.

Bill Minahan, vice president of sales and marketing for Spectrum, said much of the content has been designed to keep people at the site for a few minutes and is regularly updated to keep visitors coming back.

Smith said he plans to approach other non-competing dealers about forming a site that will connect several dealers.

On a national level, such cooperation is already starting to take place.

California-based Auto Web Interactive (www.autoweb.com) bills itself as The Nation's Electronic Auto Mall, and opened a sales office in Norwood earlier this month to serve New England.

AutoWeb has about 200 dealers nationwide and 10 in New England including Muzi Ford in Needham, but none yet on the South Shore.

Dealers pay an annual fee to belong to Auto Web, which then provides **dealership** information, lists of dealer's new and used car inventories, and even allows customers to conduct price negotiations online.

"When we go to a dealership, what we are selling them is a marketing medium and we are selling them leads," said Payam Zamani, Auto Web's vice president of marketing and sales.

Auto Web, which Zamani said has about 2 million visits per month, also attempts to provide information about each

dealership.

"We think that people out there don't shop just based on price," he said. "That is why we think it is important to have a lot of information on dealerships rather than just (have customers) send a price request."

Another online group dealer is www.autobytel.com, while auto information can be found at

www.edmunds.com.

The five [Saturn](#) dealerships owned by The Clair Group, including the ones in Hanover and Quincy, last month started Web sites that allow them to list their combined used car inventory and other features.

"We know it is the coming thing," said Eric Weiner, general sales manager for [Saturn](#) of Quincy. "More and more people are shopping for cars over the Net and we wanted to be in on the ground floor, so to speak."

But like the others, [Saturn](#) is still experimenting.

"We are all trying to find out what works best," he said. "It is tough to pinpoint how a customer learned about your dealership. This is basically another way for us to get information, specs and other facts about the cars out there in a different way to the public."

Ultimately, dealers also hope that even if their Web home page doesn't generate immediate sales, creative Web sites will help create name recognition for the future.

"The bottom line is that I would like as many people to know about this company as possible," Ricky Smith said. "Because in the long run that will create additional sales, whether it is parts sales or car sales or other sales."

[Illustration]

Photo; Caption: Ricky Smith Pontiac is among the local car dealers with a home page.

Credit: The Patriot Ledger

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